

**Literature Review relating to the current context and
discourse surrounding Indigenous Early Childhood
Education, School Readiness and Transition Programs to
Primary School**



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Executive Summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience an educational trajectory that often differs from that of non-Indigenous Australians. As a heterogeneous group - with diverse cultural and social values, norms, practices and expectations - efforts to improve the educational plight of Indigenous Australians are faced with an added degree of difficulty (McTurk, Nutton, Lea, Robinson & Carapetis, 2008). Indigenous early childhood education has become an increasingly important policy priority in Australia, with the Australian government demonstrating their commitment to ensuring better access to early childhood education for all 4 year old Aboriginal children from remote communities in the Rudd and Gillard Governments Closing the Gap initiative, which commenced in 2009 (Dreise & Thomson, 2014). Sadly, early childhood education access and outcomes for Aboriginal children have remained relatively unchanged since the commencement of the Closing the Gap initiative (Dreise & Thomson, 2014). In 2015, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational achievements remains. Quality early childhood education is often seen as the key to improving Aboriginal educational outcomes.

Since the educational experiences of Aboriginal Australians are often framed from a 'deficit' perspective, whereby the failures of Indigenous people to engage with the mainstream educational system are seen as the 'problem', an alternative approach to Indigenous early childhood education discourse is preferable. This alternative approach highlights the strengths that many Aboriginal children possess when commencing school, strengths that may result from Indigenous child-rearing practices. Consequently, this literature review utilises a strengths-based perspective for Aboriginal early childhood education and school readiness, noting that Aboriginal children are frequently expected to adapt to a foreign educational system whereby school expectations differ from that of their home environment.

The role that television can play in assisting Indigenous children to adapt to and understand Western school environments will be discussed in this review. Indeed, television is a powerful tool that can assist in expanding a child's worldview through exposure to foreign, unfamiliar content. Educational television in particular can be extremely beneficial to a child's development by assisting young children to understand difference and even develop emerging literacy skills.

However, it is important to acknowledge that transitioning to school is a holistic, relational process that occurs over a period of time before and after the very first school day, thus requiring not only children to be ready, but schools as well. The failures of some mainstream educational systems to adapt to the needs of Aboriginal children commencing school need to be

acknowledged if Aboriginal children are to experience a successful transition to school. This review reinforces the idea that any measures of Aboriginal children's school readiness are frequently undertaken from a mainstream, Western perspective, thus potentially overlooking the importance of Indigenous child-rearing practices and values on school readiness. Ideally, any evaluation of the effectiveness of transition programs in supporting the school readiness process will utilise a combination of measures that derive from both mainstream and Indigenous perspectives.

Ultimately, the main purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview about the factors that ensure an effective transition to school for Aboriginal children and the role that television can play in achieving it. It is not the prerogative of this review to identify all the factors that *impede* Indigenous success in early childhood schooling. Rather, this review of the literature identifies those factors that *lead towards* Indigenous success in the transition to school, thus utilising a strengths-based perspective on Aboriginal early childhood education, school readiness and transition to primary school. In focusing on transition programs that have demonstrated positive outcomes for Aboriginal children commencing schooling, the information provided in this literature review will be able to inform future directions for the development of culturally-safe transition programs for Indigenous children commencing primary school.

Introduction

This literature review relating to Indigenous early childhood education, school readiness and transition programs has been undertaken as part of an evaluation of the School Readiness Initiative (SRI) Television (TV) Series which is supported by the Dusseldorp Forum. An important function of this literature review is to inform the manner in which fieldwork is conducted as part of the evaluation of the SRI TV series, for example, by providing a framework for discussions with stakeholders in schools and communities during the fieldwork process.

The SRI TV series aims to provide insight into mainstream schooling culture, thus preparing Aboriginal children for commencing primary school. The SRI TV series is a unique transition program which has been designed to improve the school readiness of Indigenous children.

This literature review discusses the concept of school readiness and investigates the current discourse concerning transition programs. Understandings of effective transition programs and school readiness will be discussed. This feature of the literature review is particularly important in order to establish a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of the SRI TV series in improving Indigenous early childhood transitions into school.

This literature review provides:

- an overview of the current discourse of Indigenous early childhood education;
- an overview of discourse relating to Indigenous school readiness;
- an overview of the current discourse relating to educational television and childhood development;
- an overview of the current discourse relating to transition programs designed to improve Indigenous school readiness; and,
- an overview of discourse relating to effective transition programs for Indigenous children.

This literature review is not exhaustive in discussing the current context of Indigenous early childhood education. However, it does identify the central debates concerning transition programs designed to improve the school readiness of Indigenous children commencing their first year of formal schooling. Furthermore, this literature review provides some examples of transition programs that have demonstrated effective outcomes for Aboriginal children commencing primary school. Consequently, the factors that ensure an effective transition to

primary school are highlighted, thus ensuring that any consideration of future transition programs for Indigenous children have an evidence base to draw on from this review.

In this review, the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' are used interchangeably to reflect the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their diverse preferences for terms of address. The literature review includes international and Australian research. It is acknowledged that international Indigenous populations refer to themselves interchangeably as both 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous'. Similarly, in the Australian context, Indigenous peoples refer to themselves using interchangeable terms of address.

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Methodology

Using a range of relevant search terms, database searches were conducted in order to locate literature for this review. Academic literature was obtained via ACER Cunningham Library's subscriptions to multiple online databases, including (but not limited to) educational databases such as Informit Databases, A+ Education, EBSCOhost databases, PsycINFO and Learning Ground - Australian Indigenous Research Database. Grey literature was also obtained via ACER Cunningham Library's access to databases such as Closing the Gap Clearinghouse and WhatWorks, in addition to the databases used to obtain academic literature.

Several database searches were conducted using various combinations of the following terms: “school readiness”, “early childhood education”, “transition programs” and a cultural descriptor, such as “Indigenous” or “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander”. The cultural descriptors were varied in order to ensure that both Australian and international literature were included in search results. In order to ensure search results were highly relevant, descriptors such as “Indigenous children”, “transition to school” and other variations of the key search terms were also used. The criteria used to minimise search results were that literature had to be Indigenous specific. Fewer search results were yielded this way. Consequently, some mainstream literature on school readiness and/or transition programs was subsequently included in the literature review to ensure that further depth of analysis was possible. However, mainstream literature on school readiness and transition programs is by no means exhaustive in this review.

Additional academic, grey and other literature was obtained via a thorough analysis of references listed in key articles reviewed. Predominately, the additional references obtained outside of the ACER Cunningham Library database searches were sourced from previous literature reviews on the topics of “Indigenous school readiness” and “Indigenous transition programs”. Consequently, this research includes academic, grey and other literature sources, thus adding further depth of insight into current discourse surrounding Indigenous early childhood education and transition programs designed to improve Indigenous school readiness.

Literature Review

Indigenous early childhood education

Early childhood education is considered to be an important predictor of later educational outcomes. The Australian government has increasingly recognised the importance of quality early childhood education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, as noted in a variety of policy documents such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Closing the Gap targets of the Rudd government in 2008, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014, and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015 (Tye, 2014; Dreise & Thomson, 2014; Education Council, 2015). It is essential to improve access to early childhood education for Indigenous children in order to improve the educational disadvantage Indigenous children experience compared to non-Indigenous children (Australian Government, 2015; Education Council, 2015). In fact, improving Indigenous early childhood education may lead to “closing the gap” in later educational outcomes for Aboriginal children (as measured in comparison to non-Aboriginal children) (Australian Government, 2015).

The literature reviewed in relation to Indigenous early childhood education frequently describes Indigenous children as “less ready” for school compared to their non-Indigenous peers, with Indigenous children performing lower in cognitive and language tasks upon school entry compared to non-Indigenous children (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2011). Dockett et al (2011) attribute the gap in school readiness to socioeconomic status, low preschool participation rates for Indigenous children, the presence of risk factors in home and community environments and differences between home and school environments, particularly in terms of language and culture. Numerous risk factors that impede high quality early childhood education have been identified in the literature, such as low birth weight, parental substance use or mental health issues, cultural obligations such as ‘sorry’ business (i.e. funerals), child abuse and neglect, lack of stable employment, as well as family and community transience (McTurk et al, 2008). Predominately, risk factors can be placed into one or more of the following categories: individual, parental, health, cultural, socioeconomic and community.

Aboriginal children do encounter a range of risk factors that can interfere with high quality early childhood education. For example, Aboriginal children do attend pre-school education at a lower rates compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Kitson & Bowes, 2010; Dockett et al, 2011). However, it has also been argued that early childhood education centres and schools place a set of expectations on Aboriginal children that they do not experience in their home environments (Ball, 2012; Adams, 1998; Kitson & Bowes, 2010; Taylor, 2011). Dockett, Mason

and Perry (2006, p. 144) state that there is a cultural mismatch between home and school expectations and that “Aboriginal learners ... need to adjust to an extra range and layer of experiences, demands and expectations relating to their cultural, language and social skills” when commencing school. For those Aboriginal children that do attend formal early childhood education centres, their transition to school may be no less difficult compared to Aboriginal children with no prior formal education. This is because early childhood education tends to be more play based and less structured compared to school (Lee & Thompson, 2007). Therefore, attendance at a formal early childhood education prior to school commencement is not necessarily a good indicator as to whether or not an Aboriginal child will be judged as more or less school ready. Consequently, Indigenous school readiness must be understood from the perspective that Indigenous early childhood education is often framed from the dominant Western perspective in the literature. Indigenous children are expected to adapt to the mainstream educational system whereby behavioural, social and prior knowledge expectations may vary from those of their home context (Ball, 2012). Indeed, when Indigenous children transition to school, they will naturally encounter “different contexts, systems, curricula, philosophies and approaches” (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011).

Indigenous school readiness

This literature review found that there is no single, clear-cut definition of school readiness. Understandings of school readiness previously focused on the qualities and capacities of the child, with school readiness considered to a natural part of child development (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), 2008a). However, this understanding of school readiness was eventually dismissed because it was one-dimensional and did not account for the role that families, educators, schools and communities play in the process of children becoming ready for school (CCCH, 2008a).

Contemporary literature generally defines school readiness as a holistic concept that encompasses "cognitive, socio-emotional and physical components" (Janus & Offord, 2007, p. 2). Five areas of school readiness are frequently outlined in the literature: motor development, emotional health, social knowledge, language skills and general knowledge (McTurk et al, 2008). However, these domains of school readiness are predominately focused on the individual attributes of the child and do not take into account the impact of the child's environment on school readiness.

Consequently, a broader, ecological definition of school readiness is also evident in the literature (McTurk et al, 2008). This ecological definition recognises the influence of family, community, school and services on school readiness (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; McTurk et al, 2008) which is arguably more applicable in Indigenous contexts. The notion of *ready children*, *ready families*, *ready communities*, *ready schools* and *ready services* are mentioned in the literature when an ecological definition of school readiness is utilised. These different stakeholders - the child, family, community, school and services - have diverse roles in the school readiness process. For example:

- *Ready children* demonstrate the capacity to learn (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), 2014);
- "*Ready families* create facilitative home environments;
- *Ready communities* provide appropriate support and resources to families;
- *Ready schools* foster relationships with families and communities and are geared and resourced for child development; and,
- *Ready services* deliver quality and affordable proven school readiness programs" (McTurk et al, 2008, p. 3).

From an Indigenous perspective on school readiness, Cajete (2000, cited in Ball, 2012, p. 288) states that “[Indigenous] education is really about helping an individual find his or her face, which means finding out who you are, where you come from, and your unique character”. Another Indigenous perspective on school readiness was found in Perry et al (1998, cited in Norris, 2010, p. 19), whereby Indigenous parents were asked the question “what should be done to help children get ready for school?”. Perry et al (1998, cited in Norris, 2010, p. 19) found that Indigenous parents stated that adjustment and disposition were the most important factors, citing specific examples such as “building up respect for teachers, telling children, ‘you’re a big boy/girl’, and telling children that they’d be with a group of other kids and it would be fun”.

However, despite locating some Indigenous perspectives on school readiness, this review located no clear consensus or definition of school readiness from an Indigenous standpoint in the literature. This finding is supported by the earlier findings of Dockett, Perry and Kearney (2010) and McTurk et al (2008), who both highlighted the lack of knowledge available about school readiness and school readiness assessments from Indigenous perspectives. In the literature, school readiness is generally defined from a mainstream, often Caucasian, middle-class, worldview. Arguably, there is an inherent assumption within the literature that school readiness includes the capacity or preparedness of Indigenous children to adapt to, and fit in with, the Western, non-Indigenous school system. Yet, it is equally important that non-Indigenous schools operating within the Western schooling context also need to be prepared to accommodate Aboriginal cultural practices and worldviews, thus ensuring that school readiness is a holistic two-way process that supports diversity.

This literature review also found that all of the assessments of school readiness described in the literature are developed from a mainstream perspective, based on mainstream educational values. While various assessments¹ have been used to ascertain when a child is ready for school, from either a developmental viewpoint or an ecological viewpoint, i.e. language and literacy skills, no assessments of school readiness from an Indigenous perspective were identified in the literature. This means that previous assessments of school readiness are based on dominant, mainstream education values that may conflict with Indigenous worldviews or Indigenous child-rearing practices. McTurk et al (2008) identify the need for an Indigenous assessment of school readiness to be developed in order to better understand the concept of school readiness from an Indigenous perspective.

¹ Assessments of school readiness include the *Bracken School Readiness Assessment - Third Edition* (for further information, see <http://www.pearsonclinical.com/childhood/products/100000165/bracken-school-readiness-assessment-third-edition-bsra-3.html>).

Cultural considerations concerning school readiness definitions are important. For example, a mainstream definition of school readiness can be problematic for Aboriginal children because it does not always capture the skills Aboriginal children may possess as a result of their cultural upbringing (Ball, 2012; McTurk et al, 2008). Ball (2012) found that Aboriginal Canadian parents taught culturally-valued knowledge to their children in early childhood, such as traditional language, understanding their relationship to the land, and, their position within their family and community, thus yielding cognitive strengths amongst Indigenous children that are not recognised across mainstream school readiness indicators. When these strengths are affirmed at school, it is likely that children would be judged to be more school ready, thereby naturally creating positive school outcomes such as improved student-teacher relationships, positive conceptions of school and improved self-confidence (Ball, 2012). Yet, teachers, principals and other educators often emphasise different aspects of school readiness, such as the importance of cognitive skills, literacy skills, social skills and 'fitting in' with school cultural expectations, thereby overlooking the strengths that Indigenous children may bring to the classroom (Dockett & Perry, 2002; Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani & Merali, 2007). Consequently, the cultural mismatch that exists between home and schooling expectations for Aboriginal children is often cited in the literature as a barrier that needs to be overcome in order to meet school readiness indicators (Ball, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2002; Norris, 2010; Lewthwaite, Osborne, Lloyd, Boon, Llewellyn, Webber, Laffin, Harrison, Day, Kemp & Wills, 2015).

Mainstream indicators of school readiness, such as age and exposure to literacy sources prior to commencing school, have the potential to stereotype Indigenous children as less capable and less ready for school from the beginning of their schooling trajectory. Sadly, this increases the chances of Aboriginal children holding negative associations with school (Carbines, Grieves, Robb & Wyatt, 2008; McTurk et al, 2008). Mainstream definitions of school readiness may also clash with Aboriginal worldviews and child-rearing practices, thereby providing limited insight into how Aboriginal school readiness can actually be improved (Ball, 2012). Furthermore, mainstream definitions of school readiness are also problematic for Indigenous children because of the heterogeneity that exists within and between Indigenous populations (McTurk et al, 2008). Consequently, there is a pressing need for the concept of school readiness to be defined from one or more Indigenous standpoints that account for diverse values embedded in Indigenous child-rearing practices across Australia.

The influence of television on child development and Indigenous school readiness

"Like other forms of mass media, television provides a model of the world, its deepest values, what is defined as good or bad, positive or negative and normalises ... augments and shares common cultural norms" (Mackinlay & Barney, 2008, p. 276).

In contemporary society, television is a major aspect of the environment children grow up in (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), 2009). The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) estimates that children aged between 0-4 years old average 194 minutes of television viewing per day when they live in a subscription television household (CCCH, 2009). Television can affect child development and a child's worldview (how they see and understand the world) because children view television while they are developing socially, cognitively and emotionally (CCCH, 2009).

While watching television can have a detrimental effect on children aged 0-2 years old², research demonstrates that there are multiple benefits for children watching television shows with educational, pro-social content (CCCH, 2009). In fact, the positive benefits associated with watching educational television shows are even further enhanced for children aged over 3 years from disadvantaged backgrounds (CCCH, 2009). The CCCH (2009) recommends that "the government ... increase their investment in the development and promotion of quality Australian children's television programs", such as *Play School*, Australia's' longest running regular television show for preschoolers (Mackinlay & Barney, 2008).

² The adverse effects of young children watching television have been thoroughly canvassed in the research literature. These negative effects are generally linked to the type of television content watched (i.e. violent content) and the amount of time spent watching television when children could be engaging in other social and physical activities (CCCH, 2009). Research suggests that television can have a negative impact on: social behaviour (i.e. if watching violent content); weight (can promote obesity as it decreases physical activity); language development (parents speak less to their children when watching TV, background TV noise can distract children when listening/speaking); sleep (TV can affect quality of sleep); and, general health (exposure to alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, as well as exposure to sexual activity/sexualisation of people on TV). Other issues concerning television viewing by children include the perpetuation of stereotypes (physical stereotypes, as well as ethnic/racial stereotypes) and the representation of people, such as distorted images and gender representation, which can lead to body image issues (CCCH, 2009). Yet, these universal findings highlighting the adverse effects of watching television on children are not necessarily linked to educational television programs for children. Consequently, it cannot be assumed that these are dangers associated with children watching the SRI TV series.

This review located several research articles that discussed the impact of educational television on pre-school aged children's social and emotional development, and emerging literacy skills (Linebarger, 2000; Prince, Grace, Linebarger, Atkinson & Huffman, 2002; Linebarger, Kosanic, Greenwood & Doku, 2004; Uchikoshi, 2006; Linebarger, 2009; Lonsdale, 2010; Norris, 2010; Mares & Pan, 2013; Mackinlay & Barney, 2008). Unfortunately however, this review found limited evidence concerning the impact of educational television in Australian Indigenous children.

In the Australian context, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) *Play School* was discussed as an effective educational television show for preschoolers (Mackinlay & Barney, 2008). First airing in 1966, *Play School* is an Australian educational television show for young children "designed to stimulate learning, aid language, psychological and cognitive development, heighten social skills and encourage youthful imaginations" while concurrently providing insight into the diversity of Australian culture (Mackinlay & Barney, 2008, p. 274). *Play School* showcases difference through their segment 'look through the window' whereby culturally diverse Australians are seen at play, work or participating in various cultural activities (Mackinlay & Barney, 2008). In regards to Australian Aboriginal culture, *Play School* has shown Indigenous Australians at play or engaging in cultural activities on multiple occasions through their 'look through the window' segment (Mackinlay & Barney, 2008). Furthermore, *Play School* has had Indigenous cultural performers participate in traditional dance on the show, and also had numerous Indigenous Australian presenters on the show, including Deborah Mailman, Pauline McLeod and Christine Anu (Mackinlay & Barney, 2008). While *Play School* makes a concerted effort to expose children to difference and diversity in multicultural Australia, Mackinlay and Barney (2008) argue that *Play School* has yet to showcase the diversity that exists within Indigenous Australian culture by focusing solely on the activities of remote living Aboriginal people. In fact, *Play School* has yet to showcase any urban living Aboriginal people through their 'look through the window segment' nor have urban Indigenous Australians been portrayed in any other segments of the show (Mackinlay & Barney, 2008). Arguably, only displaying representations of remote living, traditional lifestyle practicing Aboriginal people on television perpetuates a false stereotype that all Aboriginal Australians live on country and engage in traditional cultural practices.

Indeed, from a cultural perspective, there is a danger that television shows depicting Aboriginal people and culture may portray unrealistic stereotypes (Peters-Little, 2003). Peters-Little (2003) argues that contemporary television in Australia features stereotypical representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as either 'noble' or 'savage', thus failing to showcase the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their culture. Peters-Little (2003) states that

stereotypical representations of cultural groups can be harmful, regardless of whether or not Aboriginal people depicted on television are portrayed in a positive or negative light. Similarly, Mackinlay and Barney (2008) argue that stereotypical representations of Indigenous people on television invites viewers to see Aboriginal Australians from the colonial, non-Indigenous constructed or imagined perspective, rather than from the perspective of Aboriginal lived realities. While stereotypical depictions of Aboriginal people in media and film are not necessarily intentional, the difficulty is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are a diverse, heterogeneous group that do not always share the same cultural or social values (Perso & Hayward, 2015; Purdie, Milgate & Bell, 2011). For example, urban living Aboriginal people experience a completely different lifestyle compared to remote living Aboriginal people. This diversity - if not portrayed in a sensitive and accurate manner - can be damaging for the impressionable, young minds of Aboriginal children who, developmentally, absorb as much information from their environment as possible.

Yet, in the US context, research has demonstrated a range of positive effects that can result from watching educational television. Among the television shows discussed in the literature was *Sesame Street*, an educational television show that first aired on television in 1969 through the public broadcasting television station in the United States (Mares & Pan, 2013). *Sesame Street* is still on air today, is broadcast to millions of children throughout the world, and has developed to the modern era, for example, with the recent addition of a *Sesame Street* character with autism to the show (Mares & Pan, 2013). Indeed, *Sesame Street* has had longstanding success and is arguably the most well known educational television show available to children. Linebarger et al (2004, p. 297) stated that the television show *Sesame Street* successfully taught "preschoolers school readiness skills via television" and while this point was not elaborated on in Linebarger et al (2004), other research does support this finding. For example, Mares and Pan (2013, p. 140) found that watching *Sesame Street* has positive educational outcomes (i.e. cognitive outcomes, including literacy and numeracy; learning about the world, including health and safety knowledge; social reasoning and attitudes toward out-groups") for children throughout the world in low, middle and high income countries.

The success of *Sesame Street* has lead towards other developments in educational television, such as the television show *Between the Lions*, a US puppet television series broadcast on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) Kids network designed to promote literacy in young children (Linebarger, 2000; Prince, Grace, Linebarger, Atkinson & Huffman, 2002; Linebarger, Kosanic, Greenwood & Doku, 2004; Uchikoshi, 2006; Linebarger, 2009). Several studies have evaluated the effectiveness of *Between the Lions*, and although the findings varied to some degree, the overall consensus was that watching *Between the Lions* is beneficial for emerging literacy skills,

such as phonological awareness and sound-letter recognition (Linebarger, 2000; Prince et al, 2002; Linebarger et al, 2004; Uchikoshi, 2006; Linebarger, 2009). Evidently, educational television programs can have positive impacts for children and even, improve emerging literacy skills in children before they start school (Linebarger, 2000; Prince et al, 2002; Linebarger et al, 2004; Uchikoshi, 2006; Linebarger, 2009).

However, Prince et al (2002) found that improved literacy effects were not as strong in their evaluation compared to previous studies. Prince et al (2002, p. 90) examined the literacy effects of watching *Between the Lions* on Native American Choctaw and Indianola communities and found that "the children may not have had enough prior literacy knowledge to benefit optimally from the [television] program". This finding is supported by Linebarger et al (2004, p. 299) who found that educational television programs designed to help children develop literacy skills are the least beneficial for the most at risk children "because they have no or very little familiarity with print and are not able to benefit initial from exposure to it via television" (p. 299). Consequently, children need access to literacy-rich home environments in order fully capitalise on the positive effects that can result from watching educational television programs that focus on literacy skill development (Uchikoshi, 2006). This is problematic for many Aboriginal children who do not have access to formal early childhood education and are frequently situated in literacy-poor home environments (Dockett et al, 2011). However, it is important to note that literacy development is not the primary focus of the SRI TV series and consequently, Aboriginal children living in literacy-poor home environments should still be able to benefit from watching educational, pro-social content designed to improve school readiness through exposure to mainstream schooling culture and expectations.

In fact, educational television programs have been found to have a positive influence on child development and potentially, on school readiness as well (Lonsdale, 2010). Saltmarsh (2011, p. 28) states that "the representation of schooling and school children in television ... is considered as one important site for the production and consumption of shared meaning". Via television, representations of what it entails to participate in the Western schooling culture can be portrayed, thus leading to shared imaginings of Australian school life across diverse cultural groups. In terms of improving school readiness, an educational television show that presents information on "unfamiliar cultural perspectives" can enhance school readiness by expanding a child's worldview, increasing exposure and knowledge of difference, "giving them 'practice' in relating to other, enabling cultural comparisons, personal inquiry and interest, and instilling an expectation that children will see cultures other than their own in the classroom" (Norris, 2010, p. 7). This statement is based on the understanding that "the requirements of school readiness require an acceptance and understanding of a new (learning) culture", which is highly probably

for Aboriginal children who may have to adapt to Western schooling expectations that may not align with specific cultural expectations in the home (Norris, 2010, p. 7). In order to ensure cultural sensitivity and appropriateness, Lonsdale (2010, p. 20) argues that any Indigenous specific educational television show designed to improve the school readiness of Aboriginal children must consider the following issues:

- "the need to address, directly and explicitly, certain (culturally-based) social and emotional issues that might cause confusion for Indigenous children, or their reluctance to take educational risks;
- the need to model the school environment, including the physical space and classroom culture;
- the need to deliver educational content using both Indigenous and western learning and teaching styles;
- the need to teach educational content using unique Indigenous contexts;
- the need to develop content that incorporates, connects and values both Indigenous and western worldviews;
- the need to create a bridge between Aboriginal English (AE) and Standard Australian English (SAE);
- the need to develop pedagogical methods that either reduce the need for children to 'code' switch' between cultures or make 'code switching' easier;
- the need to develop educational content that is accessible yet challenging; and,
- the need to include Indigenous families and wider Indigenous communities as part of the show's content, including modelling parental educational assistance at home and parental contact with teachers and school".

Indigenous transition to school

"The commencement of formal schooling is associated with the negotiation of changes or discontinuities in physical and learning environments, rules and routines, social status and identity, and relationships for children and families ... All of which result in tensions between change and stability and between adjusting to new challenges and preserving old patterns" (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo & Cavanagh, 2011, p. 11).

Commencing primary school signifies a major life change for children and their families, change which can be both stressful and exciting at the same time (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), 2009; Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011). Pre-primary children transition from the experience of having primary carers, family and possibly siblings as their social group, to having to adapt to a foreign school which involves different routines, structures and an entirely new social group, including peers as friends and teachers as authority figures (ETC Research Group, 2011; SNAICC, 2014). The rules are unknown, the structure is unfamiliar and for some children, interacting with same-aged peers can be challenging (Rahman, 2013). For some children who have attended formal early childhood education centres, the transition to primary school may encompass minimal change (ETC Research Group, 2011). However, for other children who have not had access to early childhood education prior to commencing school, the change encountered during the transition to school is drastic. As stated by the ETC Research Group (2011), "the more dramatic the change, the more difficult the transition to school".

Transition to school can be defined as the period of time in a child's life whereby they need to adapt to the foreign experience of school for the first time (SNAICC, 2014). It is the point at which "different contexts, systems, curricula, philosophies and approaches meet" thus resulting in new opportunities for children commencing primary school (ETC Research Group, 2011). Transition to primary school is best understood as a period of time in a child's life that occurs over time, not just in a single day when a child experiences their first day at school (ETC Research Group, 2011). While some research discusses transition as occurring within a distinct time frame, other research states that transition needs to be thought of as a process that begins before school and continues after the first day of school, without specifying any given time frame (SNAICC, 2014; Carbines et al, 2008). Consequently, it is difficult to definitively state that transition to primary school occurs within a discrete time frame. This is due to the fact that school transitions are a highly individualised experience, involving not only the child, but their family, school and community. For Aboriginal children, this review considers transition to

school to be an ongoing process, occurring over a period of time starting before the commencement of school, with the child assessed as having 'transitioned' by the people in the child's life that know them best (i.e. their teachers, parents, families and peers).

One of the biggest changes occurring during the transition to school involves children's relationship with adults at school (ETC Research Group, 2011). This is because school is structured and teacher-led, rather than play based as is frequently the case in early childhood education centres (ETC Research Group, 2011). Consequently, school transitions not only include change, but also include the development of numerous relationships, such as relationships between the child and their school, teacher and future peers. While many approaches towards improving school readiness for Indigenous children focus on building skills in the individual and family, such as improving early literacy skills (McTurk et al, 2008), recent research undertaken with Maori children in New Zealand found that the crucial factor for enhancing early school outcomes are actually the relationships children form with their peers and teachers (Peters, 2010). Research undertaken by SNAICC (2014) affirmed this earlier finding by Peters (2010), stating that a key feature of successful transition programs for Aboriginal children are the quality of student-teacher and teacher-parent relationships formed in the early phases of school. Consequently, the type of relationship developed between stakeholders - be it positive, negative or neutral - is a good indicator for measuring the success of school transitions. For example, Dockett et al (2006) state that the most successful transition programs to school develop positive relationship building capacity between stakeholders. This is because positive relationships among stakeholders enable true engagement with school, not only for the child, but also for the family and community (Dockett et al, 2006).

Transition to school is a holistic concept that situates the child within an ecological framework, surrounded by the support of their family, community and the school (SNAICC, 2014; Carbines et al, 2008; McTurk et al, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Indeed, the idea of an ecological approach to understanding transition to primary school is particularly important for Indigenous children (McTurk et al, 2008). This is because research into the evaluation of successful transition programs for Indigenous children found that successful transitions for Indigenous children encompassed a holistic approach to early childhood education (Carbines et al, 2008). A holistic and flexible approach to transition is necessary for children to develop positive associations with school (SNAICC, 2014). This includes focusing on various developmental domains within the child - health, wellbeing, social skills, academia (literacy, numeracy), motor skills - and the appropriate assessment of pre-school schools in order to monitor progress (SNAICC, 2014). Consequently, transition to primary school should not be understood as a process that simply occurs in the classroom, but rather, considered from a range of different

perspectives that acknowledge the role of multiple stakeholders - family, community, teachers, schools - in influencing a child's transition to primary school (Carbines et al, 2008,).

There are a range of different stakeholders involved in a child's transition to school, including the child themselves, parents, family, schools, services and communities. Consequently, transition programs tend to target one or more different aspects of transition, such as ensuring familiarity with the school environment, to educating parents about nutrition required to sustain a child's attention during the school day. Similarly to the manner in which school readiness is framed, transition programs can fall under the categories of: ready children, ready parents/families, ready schools, ready services and ready communities. For example:

- *Ready children* transition programs can include: antenatal interventions designed to prevent low birth weight; interventions to improve nutrition and hence, attentiveness at school; and, interventions designed to promote resiliency and improve problematic behaviour that interferes with a child's capacity to succeed at school, such as the 'High/Scope Perry Preschool' and the 'Houston Parent-Child Development Project' in the United States (McTurk et al, 2008).
- *Ready families* transition programs can include: programs designed to teach parenting skills that can correct 'problematic' child behaviour or assist parents to cope with difficult child behaviours; home visiting nursing services that enable improvements in child health and wellbeing (McTurk et al, 2008); and, the 'Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters' (HIPPY) that teaches parents to be their child's first educators in the home. HIPPY encourages reading in the home environment which subsequently improves the literacy skills of both parents and their children. HIPPY improves a child's school readiness through the development of literacy skills prior to formal schooling (Barnett, Roost & McEachran, 2012).
- *Ready schools* transition programs can include: programs to promote a positive school environment; and, programs to support cultural diversity among school students (McTurk et al, 2008; SNAICC, 2014).
- *Ready communities* transition programs can include: consultation with the community in regards to the development of transition programs (i.e. to ensure that transition programs are aligned with local Aboriginal child-rearing values); providing communities with the opportunity to actively participate in the development of culturally-appropriate transition programs; and, training and employing local Aboriginal

staff in services or schools in order to facilitate effective transition (Lee & Thompson, 2007).

Indeed, transition to school is a holistic process. It requires the collaborative effort of a variety of stakeholders in order to ensure that school transitions have a positive impact on a child's wellbeing, learning and development (SNAICC, 2014; ETC Research Group, 2011).

“Children and families’ first experiences with school have significant implications for educational and broader developmental outcomes. This is accentuated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who experience higher vulnerability and exclusion in early childhood, including particularly low enrolment and attendance rates in preschool and early childhood programs. Current research indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children frequently begin school demonstrating poorer indicators of development in areas such as literacy and numeracy than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the transition to school will set the pattern for inclusion or exclusion, and thus engagement or non-participation, within mainstream education for that child’s schooling life.” (SNAICC, 2014, p. 3).

While Dockett et al (2006) argue that there is no Aboriginal consensus on what constitutes or defines a successful transition to school for Indigenous children, SNAICC (2013) state that effective transitions to school for Aboriginal children enable children, parents and families to feel comfortable, connected and engaged with their school, community and environment. Also of upmost importance is the ability to the transition program to foster a readiness in children to achieve early learning outcomes, regardless of the prior knowledge they bring into the classroom (SNAICC, 2013). SNAICC (2014, p. 4) state that the most important factors for a successful transition to school for Aboriginal children includes:

- recognising that Aboriginal children's potential to learn is more important than the specific knowledge they bring to the classroom at the beginning of school;
- building familiarity and relationships between the school and children, parents and family; and,
- fostering true engagement and involvement with the school for family and children.

Ultimately, an effective transition to school results in children who like school, look forward to going regularly, and show steady growth in academic and social skills (CCCH, 2008b). Effective school transitions should result in:

- "the child being able to engage successfully in classroom learning appropriate to the first year of formal schooling;
- the child's parents and/or family being comfortable with their child being in school and with their ability to contribute to and support the child's learning; and,
- the school/class teacher being best prepared to provide the most appropriate learning experiences for the child" (Carbines et al, 2008).

However, the success of any transition program must take into account the importance of ensuring that families understand the school culture, the manner in which schools operate and most importantly, trust the school and teachers with their children. Winkler (2009) argues that successful transitions to school require greater parental involvement for Indigenous children and families, due to historical, negative associations many Aboriginal people have with the education system. Consequently, the importance of ensuring that parents and families are included in the transition to school process cannot be dismissed, particularly for Aboriginal parents, families and communities.

Defining and identifying effective Indigenous transition programs

"For most of the history of Indigenous education, the dominant approach has been one that has sought to assimilate Indigenous children into western culture, with little regard until relatively recently for the culture of Indigenous people. There has been an assumption that Indigenous children will have better success at school if their readiness is enhanced, rather than any serious questioning of how schools can be made more ready for Indigenous children" (Carbines et al, 2008).

Nolan, Hamm, McCartin and Hunt (2009) state that there are seven key indicators to children having a positive start to school. These indicators include:

- "children separating easily from their parent or caregiver;
- children attending and participating in school;
- children demonstrating knowledge of the school environment, including school routines, key staff and their roles;
- children having and making friends;
- children seeking out assistance when needed;
- children asking questions and contributing to classroom discussions;
- children exploring and trying new things; and,
- children confidently communicating with educators and peers" (Nolan et al, 2009, p. 12).

However, it is important to recognise that some of these indicators of a positive start to school are framed from a Western perspective. In particular, the indicator concerning communication styles, such as children asking questions during classroom discussions, may not be applicable to Indigenous children. For example, Ball (2012) argues that in Indigenous culture, it is less common for children to participate in question asking and answering during educational discussions compared to their non-Indigenous peers. Ball (2012, p. 290) states that Indigenous children are generally taught not to talk or brag about their accomplishments, "typically learn[ing] not to demonstrate knowledge of something she or he expects an older person to already know (for instance, answering such questions from the teacher as, What color is the sky today?)". Consequently, it is important to understand how effective transitions might be framed from Indigenous perspectives.

Dockett et al (2006) state that effective transitions to school occur when the school embraces Aboriginal culture, have high expectations for Aboriginal children, welcome parents, develop sound relationships and recognise the strengths of Aboriginal students. Dockett, Perry, Mason, Simpson, Howard, Whitton, Gilbert, Pearce, Sanagavarapu, Skattebol and Woodrow (2008, p. 6) identify several features of effective school transition programs for Aboriginal children and families, including:

- the development of positive relationships between stakeholders, such as child/teacher, parent/teacher relationships, thus leading to improved student learning outcomes and increased engagement with school;
- a focus on more than just the academic or school culture;
- a multi-faceted approach that focuses on many dimensions of the child and family;
- an approach that builds upon the strengths of the child, family and community;
- a participatory approach that involves and engages children, families and communities;
- the facilitation of skill development in children, particularly literacy and numeracy skill development;
- schools and teachers having high expectations for Aboriginal children; and,
- the promotion of wellbeing for children and families, as well as the promotion of a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school.

Dockett and Perry (2001, cited in Dockett et al, 2007, p. 7) also suggest that effective transition programs must: view each child as a capable learner; understand the difference between school orientation and school transition; be flexible and cater to the diversity of individual students and their families; and, take into account the context of the school environment, including understanding the local community within which the school is situated.

Specifically relevant to school transition programs, SNAICC (2014) identified a range of features that are evident in effective transition programs for Aboriginal children. These features include:

- schools being flexible in service delivery, staffing and the provision of support to students and families;
- schools collaborating with other services, family and communities;

- schools having culturally competent staff who exhibit positive attitudes towards Aboriginal children and their families;
- schools employing Indigenous staff, particularly staff from the local community;
- schools being willing to cooperate with and learn from the local community; and,
- schools committing "to reflecting on barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accessing their programs [schools] and how they could change this" (SNAICC, 2014, pp. 6-10).

SNAICC (2014, p. 6) also argue that an effective school transition program for Indigenous children will: "view each child ecologically, in the context of their family and community; work holistically to meet each child's transition needs; remove any potential obstacle that could hinder a child successfully beginning school; act as an advocate for the child throughout the transition process; and, instil in children a love of learning and a confident attitude".

Arguably, the most effective transition programs for Indigenous children utilise a holistic approach to school readiness, one that accounts for the diverse roles of multiple stakeholders - such as the child, parents, family and school - in the transition process.

Conclusion

This literature review has demonstrated the powerful effect that educational television can have on broadening children's worldviews and helping them to understand new ideas, details and information. However, as the examination of the broader school readiness and transition literature highlight, television is only one tool in a battery of other connected agencies that work to achieve an effective transition to primary school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Transition is a highly interconnected, relational and holistic process - particularly for Indigenous children - which requires all relevant stakeholders (such as the parents, family, community and school) to work together to produce a satisfactory outcome for Indigenous children commencing school. Indeed, television can have a crucial role in ensuring that the transition process is effective for Indigenous children. It can open up a child's worldview and assist them to understand diverse contexts that differ from their home environment, such as the Western schooling system. Furthermore, television can assist parents and families to gain insight into the expectations of the Western schooling system, thus providing Indigenous children's support system with critical, essential information about the school process. However, while television certainly has a role to play in preparing Indigenous pre-schoolers to transition to school, it is only one component to a highly interconnected process that involves the collaboration of multiple stakeholders to achieve the best outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children commencing primary school. Consequently, the SRI TV series can be a significant component to improving the school readiness of Indigenous children, but, it is only one component among a suite of others.

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